

Be Audacious

August 30, 2026

As I've been praying with these scriptures all week, especially the exchange between Jesus and Peter, I keep envisioning Jesus singing, "If I should stay, I would only be in your waaaaaay..."

I'll admit, Dolly Parton and Tim Curry both dying on Tuesday took my sermon prep in a different direction than I had originally intended. They were two people who could hardly have been more different, and yet both of them understood something that our scriptures understand, too: there is something holy about refusing to become smaller just because the world would find that more convenient.

Dolly Parton did not exactly spend her life trying to blend in. Neither did Tim Curry. Thank God. Dolly arrived in country music looking like somebody had crossed a rhinestone with a firecracker. Tim Curry walked onto a stage in fishnets and a corset and essentially announced that respectability was an illusion. These were not people who spent their lives asking, "What will people think?" They were, in their own very different ways, audacious.

I think audacity gets a bad rap in church. We tend to associate holiness with being nice. Quiet. Appropriate. Reasonable. We like our saints humble, preferably in beige. But Jesus was not particularly interested in beige. Paul was not particularly interested in beige either.

"Let love be genuine." That sounds lovely until you keep reading. Bless the people who hurt you. Feed your enemy. Give them something to drink. Rejoice when someone else is rejoicing. Weep when someone else is weeping. Do not repay evil for evil. Try to live peaceably with everyone.

This is not beige Christianity. This is audacious love.

It is the kind of love that refuses to let somebody else's behavior determine the size of your own soul. Paul is saying: Don't let cruelty make you cruel. Don't let hatred make you hateful. Don't let somebody else's smallness shrink you. That is a pretty radical way to live.

Then there is Jesus. Peter has just gotten the biggest question of his life right. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus tells him he's right. Peter is probably feeling pretty good. Then Jesus starts explaining what that actually means. The Messiah will suffer. The Messiah will be rejected. The Messiah will be killed. Peter says, "Nope" and takes Jesus aside and tells him, essentially, "You have the whole Messiah thing wrong." Which is pretty audacious, considering.

Jesus responds with one of the harshest things he ever says to one of his friends: "Get behind me, Satan." Poor Peter. One minute he's the rock. The next minute he's Satan, the adversary. It is a rough afternoon for Peter.

But notice why Jesus says it. Like the opening line of Dolly's mega-hit "I Will Always Love You," Jesus knows that if he stays he will only be in the way. Peter and the other disciples had an understanding that the Messiah was going to rescue them from oppression. "They were looking for someone to lead them in the fight, not someone who was ready to die." (Eugene Gibson) But

Jesus' version of Messiahship is very, very different than the conventional expectations of his day.

We do the same thing as Peter did. We decide what a good Christian looks like. We decide what a good church looks like. We decide what a respectable woman looks like. We decide what a respectable man looks like. We decide what faith is supposed to sound like. We decide what God would and would not possibly do.

Then along comes God, usually wearing something we don't approve of, and says: Move. (Or maybe this week, "Take a jump to the left and then a step to the right.") You're in the way. You see, this is a spot where Dolly Parton and Tim Curry have something to teach us. Neither of them were particularly interested in being what other people thought they ought to be.

Dolly knew exactly what people were going to say about her. They were going to call her a tramp. They were going to make jokes about her body. They were going to dismiss her as a blonde with big hair and bigger ambitions. So she got bigger hair. She wrote the songs. She built the business. She gave away the books. She opened the theme park. She made the money.

Then she turned around and used that money to make other people's lives a little better. There is something wonderfully subversive about that. She did not become smaller in order to make other people comfortable. She became herself.

Tim Curry did something similar. Through his role in "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," Curry gave a particular kind of permission to people who did not quite fit into the spaces they had been given. It gave the weird kids a place to go. It gave people who had been told that they were too much, too strange, too flamboyant, too different, too queer, a place where being different was not a defect.

There is a reason that so many people who grew up feeling unwelcome in churches found something that felt almost like church at a midnight showing of Rocky Horror. It was almost church, because it offered a place where you could show up as yourself and discover that you were not alone. You see, sometimes the most liberating thing you can hear when you are young and queer and weird and terrified that there is something fundamentally wrong with you is this: You are not the problem. You don't need to get smaller, the world needs to get bigger.

That sounds to me a lot like scripture. "Let your love be genuine." In other words: don't let the world tell you who you are. Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold. Don't confuse conformity with goodness. Be transformed.

Which sounds suspiciously like another Rocky Horror instruction: "Don't dream it, be it." Now, I realize that "Don't dream it, be it" is not technically in the Bible, but Paul is saying something remarkably similar. It is not enough to dream about a world where love is genuine. Be people whose love is genuine. It is not enough to dream about a world where strangers are welcomed. Welcome the stranger. It is not enough to dream about a world where people who disagree with us are treated with dignity. Bless them. It is not enough to dream about justice. Practice it. Don't just dream it. Be it.

Then we are told to take up our cross. Now, I want to be careful here, because Christians have done terrible things with those words. The church has often told people who are already being

denied dignity, safety, agency, or freedom that they simply need to deny themselves a little more. Women have been told to stay in abusive marriages because that is their cross to bear. Queer people have been told to deny who they are. Poor people have been told that their suffering is spiritually good for them. People who have been harmed by systems of power have been asked to surrender even more while the people with power protect what they have.

Jesus is not asking any of us to become smaller so that somebody else can remain comfortable. Jesus is asking us to give up the things that keep us from becoming fully alive. The ego. The need to win. The need to be right. The need to control the outcome. The need to be admired. The fear of looking foolish. The fear of being too much. The fear of being different. Jesus says: Let it go. Lose your life, he says, and you will find it.

That is a terrifying invitation. It is also a liberating one. Because some of us have spent an awful lot of energy trying to preserve a life that no longer fits. Maybe the life we need to lose is the life in which everybody has to approve of us. Maybe it is the life in which we are always the responsible one. Maybe it is the life in which we never disappoint anyone. Maybe it is the life in which we have to have the answer. Maybe it is the life in which we have decided that God cannot possibly surprise us anymore.

Peter's problem was not that he loved Jesus too little. Peter's problem was that he loved the version of Jesus he thought he understood too much. Peter wanted Jesus to be the Messiah he could recognize. Jesus was becoming something Peter could not yet imagine.

That happens to us. Sometimes God is changing the thing we are trying hardest to protect. Sometimes the Spirit is asking us to let go of an old certainty. Sometimes the faithful thing is not to hold on tighter. Sometimes the faithful thing is to say, "Okay. I don't understand this yet. But I am willing to follow." That takes courage. It also takes humility.

Which is where Dolly comes back in. One of the things I admire about Dolly Parton is that her audacity was never simply about herself. She took up enormous space and somehow made more space for everyone else. She was unapologetically Dolly, but she did not require everyone else to be Dolly. That is an important distinction. Christian freedom is not: "This is the one way to be." Christian freedom is: "I am free enough to become myself, and secure enough to let you become yourself, too."

That is Romans 12. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Make room. Make room for somebody else's joy without needing it to match yours. Make room for somebody else's grief without rushing them through it. Make room for somebody whose faith looks different from yours. Make room for somebody whose gender expression makes you uncomfortable. Make room for somebody who has changed their mind. Make room for somebody who is not sure. Make room for somebody who is entirely, gloriously themselves.

Quite frankly, the church (and Jesus for that matter) does not need more people who know how to behave. The church needs people who know how to love. There is a difference. Behavior asks, "What are the rules?" Love asks, "Who is standing in front of me?" Behavior asks, "What will people think?" Love asks, "What does this person need?" Behavior asks, "How do I avoid getting in trouble?" Love asks, "What am I willing to risk?"

Friends, genuine Christian love is not polite. It can be disruptive. It can be inconvenient. It can make a mess. It can require us to apologize. It can require us to change our minds. It can require us to give up our place at the center. It can require us to say, “I was wrong.” It can require us to let go. Sometimes that letting go is the hardest thing of all. Because love does not always mean holding on. Sometimes love means opening your hand. Sometimes love means letting someone become who they are without demanding that they remain who you need them to be. Sometimes love means recognizing that something has come to the end of its season and trusting that an ending is not the same thing as failure. Sometimes love means saying goodbye.

That is part of what makes the deaths of Dolly Parton and Tim Curry feel so poignant. People are grieving not simply entertainers but people who, in very different ways, gave us permission. Permission to laugh. Permission to be strange. Permission to be generous. Permission to take up space. Permission to become our authentic selves.

Perhaps that is one of the most beautiful things a human life can leave behind: not simply a body of work, but a little more freedom in the lives of those who encountered it. A little more courage. A little more joy. A little less shame. A little more room.

So maybe that is the question these scriptures leave us with. Where are we still standing in the way? What are we protecting that God is trying to transform? What are we holding on to so tightly that there is no room for anything new? What part of ourselves have we made smaller because somebody once told us it was too much? What would it look like to become audaciously, extravagantly alive? Not selfishly. Not at somebody else’s expense. But with the kind of freedom that makes other people freer, too.

Paul tells us to let love be genuine.

Jesus tells us to follow.

Dolly tells us, by the shape of her life, that there is no particular virtue in becoming less of yourself to make the world comfortable.

Tim Curry reminds us that sometimes the people who look most outrageous to the respectable world are the ones creating sanctuary for people who have been told there is no place for them.

So be transformed. Be genuine. Be generous. Be ridiculous when ridiculousness is required. Be brave enough to look foolish. Be willing to change. Make room.

And for God’s sake, literally, don’t spend your one wild and precious life standing in the way of what love is trying to do. Amen.

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